

God cares for the weak and the helpless

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[0 : 00] of thousands of refugees in camps all around Central Europe and maybe we think well that story! sounds more fitting for there rather than for us here in nice comfortable relatively affluent! Edinburgh. But when we recognize the reality that desperation takes many forms then I think we begin to see! that there is relevance for us.

as we are invited to recognize that the God who sees is the God of compassion. As Calvin put it, the Christ who put on our feelings also put on our flesh.

So God's willing to meet our desperation with this compassion and we're going to see that and the second and it's related truth for ourselves is that God is ready to meet our lack with his overflowing grace. And again this is a pattern we see it in this one woman's story but it's a pattern we see and we could trace all through the Bible that God often chooses to demonstrate his grace and his power in the context of our weakness. To show to us and to show to the world that our life depends on God.

That the life of faith is a daily and a constantly placing our weak hands into God's almighty hand. It is about learning to discover and to rediscover that God is glorious and God is good.

So you and I, we need this little story and the truths that it conveys and we need to claim the truths of this story for our lives.

[1 : 51] So let's get into the first couple of verses and help us to recognize that God meets desperation with his compassion. Because what we see is a human tragedy developing.

So there's a company of the prophets and we've encountered them before and a wife from one of the prophets comes and explains to us the extent of the tragedy that is beginning to develop.

So her husband, the prophet has died and he has died leaving a debt of some kind significant enough that the creditor is now claiming the debt. She cannot pay the debt and so what's going to happen is that her two sons are going to be sold into slavery. And standing behind all that is the reality that this woman appears to be going through all this by herself. And we say this because in the Old Testament, there were poor laws that spoke about the help that a community would provide.

And in particular, it spoke to us of a kinsman redeemer, that within God's Old Testament law, there was provision for a family member who would take responsibility for settling debts.

There is no kinsman redeemer here. And so in desperation, her faith cries out to Elisha, to the Lord's prophet. She has nothing. Her only hope rests in God.

[3 : 22] And what's Elisha's response to this situation? How can I help you? He is God's man and he has God's heart and he longs to help. His heart is moved instinctively with compassion for this woman of God in her suffering.

As I was thinking about this story, I remembered back in, I think it was 2012, teaching the story of the Good Samaritan to a group of Chinese students who had never heard it before.

And as we were talking about what Jesus teaches about if you see someone on the road, you know, that invitation to help and to use one's resources, they were sharing a story, a true story, that had happened in their country in 2011. It became a huge story across all the news networks of a little girl in a busy market who was knocked over by a van, not just once, but twice.

And over the course of some 10 or 15 minutes, multiple people who had witnessed what happened, they did nothing. And so it led to the country asking big questions of themselves. Why did people not get involved? How could people just walk by as if nothing had ever happened?

God's man is not unconcerned. God's prophet is willing to enter in. And this speaks hope to the women, because now she knows she will have access to God in her troubles. It's wonderful to look at the life of Elisha and to recognize that Elisha mirrors for us the compassion of God. In Exodus

chapter 34, when Moses says to God, God, show me yourself. God says, no one can see my glory and live, but here's what I'll do. I'll tell you my name. I'll tell you my character. And as God begins to talk about what he is like, he says, I am the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God. [5 : 58] And as we read, for example, the book of Exodus, it's the compassion of God that explains why he acted to redeem his people from slavery. It is God's compassion that moved him to respond to their cries of misery and their distress, sending Moses to be a deliverer, working those great miracles of his power so that the people of God would be free to know their God and to know the heart of their God, that he is compassionate. It's the same God who established within the Old Testament those poor laws that express the particular care that God has for widows and orphans for the weak and the helpless and that he expects the people of God to have. In the New Testament, the religion that God approves of is when we care for the widow and the orphan, because then the people of God are reflecting a heart like his.

But to think still further, the emotional response of Elisha in this woman's story speaks to us again of the emotional life of the Lord Jesus.

If you want to read a good essay on that, B.B. Warfield has a wonderful essay on the emotional life of the Lord Jesus. But to think about the Gospels, we read the stories of the life of Jesus and we see the compassion that he had for huge crowds.

Sometimes he sees the crowds and he has compassion and so what he does is he heals all the sick within the crowd. Sometimes he sees the crowd and he has compassion so that he feeds them because they're hungry.

Sometimes he has compassion and he teaches them because he sees them as like sheep without a shepherd. They are ignorant. They don't know the way back to God and so he teaches.

[8 : 01] But sometimes too we see in the Gospels that Jesus has compassion on individuals. So he walks along a road and he sees a funeral procession and here is a widow who has lost her son and the son is in the coffin and Jesus stops the procession, touches the coffin and commands the boy to live.

Or another time, a desperate father comes with a young son who's been possessed by a demon that is trying to destroy him and Jesus, moved with compassion, drives out the demon.

Or as the lepers, those untouchables who had to stay a great distance from other people, as they cried out to Jesus for help, it was compassion that saw Jesus move towards them and touch them and heal them.

Our Savior has a heart of compassion and that compassion leads to action. And we can go further as well and recognize that in the heart of the Gospel, there is compassion for a lost and a broken and a sinful world.

To think about that great parable of the Good Samaritan is to recognize that in the Gospel, Jesus becomes for us the Great Samaritan. He sees our misery, our desperation.

[9 : 29] And of course, when we look honestly at the Bible and our own lives, we realize that our spiritual misery is actually a mess of our own making. Because we are the ones who have turned our back on God.

We are those who are treating God shamefully. Yet the Holy Lord Jesus, who could have stayed at a distance, passed by on the other side, he enters in. And his heart of compassion, his holding nothing back commitment to be a Savior, leads him to go to the cross to give his life in our place to pay the ransom price.

God meets desperation with his compassion. It's in his nature and it's the heart of the Gospel. But I think it's worth us taking a little sort of pause and a little sidebar at this point.

Because we need to recognize that what's true for this woman is not true for every person. Our God is in control of all things. Nothing happens apart from his will.

And our God is good all the time. But yet even within our story, there is a point of tension. Because we have a prophet and we're told that he revered the Lord.

[10 : 47] He honored the Lord. That was what he lived for. But he has died and his family are suffering. And that at least invites us to consider that painful mystery that has always probably provided questions for people of faith and people without faith.

Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Why does he allow bad things to happen to his people? You know, in this story and in every miracle story that we read in the Bible, the God of compassion acts in a particular way to bring a particular deliverance, to bring an

immediate end to the desperation, to draw them out of the miry clay.

But you and I know that's not always the case. And part of the life of faith is wrestling with those things that we know to be true while living in the tension of the way life is, to trust that God is good. That this one who reveals himself as gracious and compassionate, he will either, because he must be faithful to himself and to his people, he will either take us out of the trouble that we are in, or he will and he must be with us to give us grace, even for as long as he leaves us in those trials and troubles.

But in this woman's story, the compassion on display will lead to complete transformation. But here's why I think you and I need to hear this story.

[12 : 34] Firstly, because we need to remind ourselves some truths about God. The first time God is named by a human being, in the book of Genesis, Hagar, who's in desperate trouble, and God came and spoke and delivered and gave hope.

And she said, you're the God who sees me. God says, I see you. And he knows where our troubles are.

He knows that desperation takes many forms. Our story is not this woman's story. And the God who is altogether wise, he knows exactly the trials and the troubles that you and I are facing.

Now, they may not mirror the size and the complexity of her story, but they are real nonetheless. Perhaps it's loneliness and isolation.

Perhaps you find yourself in a city and full of crowds, but you feel alone. You're desperate for friendship. Maybe your trouble is rejection or bullying.

[13 : 49] Maybe you find yourself excluded because of faith. Maybe persecuted online for your beliefs. And it hurts. Maybe it's in the workplace or where you study or go to school.

Maybe you're struggling to keep up with the workload. Maybe you're kind of breaking under the burdens of responsibilities. Maybe it's uncertainty about the future. Career prospects.

Maybe it's a very basic fear and anxiety. When the guys from Solace come on Friday night in November, they'll be asking the question, is there any hope for the future?

Maybe that's a question we find ourselves asking. Well, the God who sees us is the God who says to us, come to me.

Cry out to me in faith. Ask Jesus. Help me. God also is saying to us through this story and through what we discover in the Bible, he's saying to us, see my heart.

[15 : 05] Learn to trust in my character. To fix our eyes by faith on Jesus who is described as our sympathetic high priest.

Don't believe the lie that God is too distant, that God is too big, that God is too busy for the likes of me and you. Don't tell yourself, my troubles don't really matter to God.

I shouldn't really bother God with this. And certainly don't say, I should be able to deal with this by myself. God wants to supply grace at all times, in all circumstances, in all our weakness.

Rather, see the compassion of Jesus in the gospels. See the compassionate Savior on the cross and know his heart in heaven is unchanged.

He still loves us. He still, as we thought about this morning, pours out the Spirit on his people. There is grace for us from Jesus. Jesus. But I think God is also saying to us as his church, it's something about Elisha.

[16 : 30] And I think God says to his church through this story, you go be my hands and feet. I've been tidying up my bookshelves recently and I came across an old book that my auntie, some of you might know my auntie, Katie Ann McKinnon.

She wrote a book called Love Breaks Through. It's a really lovely book. It's a really lovely title. She went to Kenya as a nurse and set up lots of baby homes and orphanages.

And what a wonderful mission for a follower of Jesus to let God's love break through. To let the light of God's love break through and into the darkness and despair that people face.

Just like Elisha, confronted by human suffering, to see and to feel and to act for Jesus, following the pattern of Jesus.

What that looks like will look very different for us all. We won't go and set up baby homes in Kenya or to think about Adam. You know, we might not have a ministry to refugee camps and medical ministry.

[17 : 52] We all have our own circles. We have our own particular communities. We have our own gifts and abilities. But there are things in common by way of responding.

I think one of them is the need for us to slow down. To try and build some margins. Perhaps to go unplugged so that we can see the people who are in front of us.

And to see the people in front of us as people made in God's image. People who matter to God. It will help us to help others if we are regularly reflecting on the compassion of God for us in the gospel.

That's what will stop us becoming weary or cynical or just saying the job is too much. If we recognize that God stopped at nothing to love us and to save us and to bring us to himself. As we've been thinking from the book of Acts, we need to rely on the spirit to both guide our steps, to guide our conversations, and to give us the power and the wisdom that we need to know how best we can help.

[19 : 19] We need to ask for an increasing desire to give God glory in our lives in this way by following the pattern that he says.

Because in this story, it's God through his prophet Elisha who meets desperation with his compassion. Well, let's think secondly about another reality we see in the story, and it's this, that God meets our lack with his overflowing grace.

There's a quote from J.C. Royal that I really appreciate to do with friendship. A friend is someone who halves our sorrows and doubles our joys. And just think about an experience perhaps you have had of going through a hard time and a friend comes to the door and they sit and they spend time with you.

Or they cook or they provide a meal for you. Or they send you a message and they tell you you're praying for you. Or they stand by you and for you.

When we've had that experience, we understand that friendship, friendship, and Christian friendship is a wonderful gift to receive, which also makes it a wonderful gift to give.

[20 : 43] But to come back to our story, the impression that we are given is that this woman has no one. She has no friend to stand by her until Elisha steps in.

And so we get this beautiful truth of here is God's prophet, here is the one who represents God in the world and God through Elisha becomes a true friend to the helpless. Again, illustrating what the Bible teaches, that God's strength is made perfect in human weakness.

The story reveals it in a different way. You know, to read the Old Testament, you discover that God's people, there were battles that they won that only God could win for them. Go to the Gospels, there are healings that people experience that only Jesus could give to them.

This woman finds a help and a friend that only God could be and give. She discovers that God is an incredibly generous giver.

The God who pours out his spirit on his people like a monsoon rain is the God that David celebrates in Psalm 23 of the overflowing cup of goodness and mercy.

[22 : 02] Now we see he's the God of overflowing grace as the oil continues to flow. So to just pick up our story again, Elisha asks the woman in verse 2 about her resources and he discovers your servant has nothing except a small jar of olive oil, just a little jar of oil.

A few weeks ago now we were in the life of Elijah and Elijah was sent to a widow's home to be provided for in a time of famine by a woman who has just a little olive oil and just a little bit of flour and again God miraculously provided food for her family and for Elisha.

It's happening again. Notice in verse 3 and 4 that she's called to exercise faith. This is a moment that's going to be public because she has to go around and ask all her neighbors for empty jars. Why do you want my jars? Surely someone's going to ask well it's because the prophet has come and he said I need to get the jars and if I get the jars then my tiny little jar is going to fill them all. God's going to look after me.

She's exercising faith in her community and as she is invited to go and collect and then to pour and to fill she's invited to take God at his word.

[23 : 29] Just like Elijah's widow just like when Jesus turned water into wine remember that first miracle where he reveals his glory the servants are taking these massive jars of water to the master of ceremonies taking Jesus at his word that by the time it arrives and by the time it's drawn out it's going to be wine and it is and it's the very best of wine.

So we see in verse 5 and 6 her obedience she left him and shut the door behind her and her sons they brought the jars to her and she kept pouring when all the jars were full she said to her son bring me another one but he replied there's not a jar left then the oil stopped flowing.

And then we see the outcome and we see the wonderful overflowing nature of God's grace so she goes to tell Elisha and Elisha said go sell the oil pay your debts you and your sons can live on what is left.

God doesn't just give her enough to pay off the debts to stop the slavery God goes above and beyond. Debts are paid and there's plenty left to live on.

God's miracle shows the women's lack being met by a generous outpouring of grace. And this absolutely prepares us for the story of the Lord Jesus and the way Jesus operates.

[25 : 01] So remember Mark chapter six Jesus asks the disciples there's this great big hungry crowd he asked them what do you have five loaves and we have two fish how will that do for feeding such a great crowd God then Jesus prays and one loaf becomes a thousand meals.

That's generous grace. Or to think about another story to think about the time when Jairus an official came to meet Jesus and fell at his feet to tell Jesus that his daughter was seriously ill and then a message comes later from the servants at home don't bother Jesus anymore because your daughter has died and Jesus at that point says don't be afraid just believe and as the story progresses behind closed doors Jesus calls her back to life in another example of his lavish grace and these miracles provide us a little window into the story of God's salvation here is a woman with a debt that she cannot pay the Bible tells us every human being has a massive debt not financial but moral we are made to honor

God we are made to obey God we are made to love God and to love our neighbor and every time that we fail in those duties we are amassing debt and to examine our hearts and our conscience and to hear the testimony of God's word they all speak the same message that by nature we are guilty of rebellion by nature we turn our backs by nature we don't do those things that we are called to do and even when we try our best we still fall short of God's glory and so the Bible uses a picture of slavery not that slavery is a prospect to come but by nature we are slaves to sin this is a condition a situation we cannot pay God back from we cannot earn our way out of and so we find ourselves the Bible tells us heading for ultimate death the spiritual death of being separate from God and his goodness and into that desperate situation

God steps in Jesus the eternal son of God this sinless one enters into this world that he created this world that had turned its back on God he becomes one of us in order to become our kinsman redeemer remember that figure from the old testament the close relative who agrees to pay the debt in full to set a person free and to restore them to good standing Jesus came to do that for us on the cross he came to serve us to give his life as a ransom for many he has cancelled the debt that would condemn us when our faith is in Jesus we're told it's as if our record of debt is nailed to the cross of Christ and it is marked paid in full as a free gift of

God's grace and not only that not only is our debt cancelled the God of overflowing grace goes above and beyond he invites us into his family he invites us into a life where we have peace with God where we have eternal life with God knowing him now with a promise of knowing him and enjoying him forever and when we understand what the Bible tells us about ourselves and about our God about the problem of sin and the reality of salvation then how we can have this becomes the question for our lives and here again we return to the woman who gives us the answer to see our distress to see our need we are to call out to Jesus for his help for his salvation and remember he is the one who encourages us to ask and to seek and to knock to come to a

[30 : 00] God who is generous to bank everything on God's kindness and compassion to place our hope squarely in the truth of who God is as revealed in his son Jesus he is a God of love and kindness and forgiveness for people like you and me and so as the story shows us God meeting our lack with his overflowing grace it's a story that invites us to humble faith like the hymn writer to say nothing in my hands I bring simply to your cross I cling this woman was wise to know her resources were not up to the task of meeting her needs your human resources my human resources cannot meet our basic need to be right with God but Jesus can and so we are called to go to him because he is able and he is willing the story as we hear it as well invites us to heartfelt worship of our

God as we place ourselves within this story to reflect on the desperate trouble that we were in because of sin to think about the incredible the indescribable gift of love that God the Father has sent his own son to be our savior then that causes our hearts to recognize he is of supreme worth and value it leads to joy it opens our mouth to sing his praise it opens our hearts that we would live with grateful obedience and then this story too invites us to an even greater happy ending than we

find in this story it's wonderful to see the transforming work of God from the threat of slavery from having nothing that now her debts are cancelled her families together they have enough to live on that's a happy ending that's a work of

God but the story invites us into a still greater happy ending so whenever the Bible tells stories of miracles those miracles are redemptive in their nature we see that here those sons are not sold as slaves but every miracle provides for us a window a window into the new creation a window into the kingdom of God and in the kingdom of God there is and there never will be any lack there will be no suffering there will be no separation there will be no sin there will be no death it is a place where we will live eternally under the waterfall of God's love and grace and we are invited to live in that grace today understanding that someday we will feast in a new way and that will last forever